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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wu, X., Bos, I., Kistemaker, L., & Gosens, R. (2018). *WNT5A/5B signaling represses functional responses in lung epithelial progenitors*. Abstract from ATS 2018, San Diego, California, United States.

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WNT5a/5b Signaling Represses Functional Responses in Lung Epithelial Progenitors

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Background: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) represents a worldwide concern with high morbidity and mortality, and is believed to be driven in part by accelerated ageing of the lung. Although several studies indicate a role for non-canonical WNT signaling, in particular of WNT-5A and WNT-5B, in ageing and COPD, the precise impact of non-canonical WNT signaling on lung repair remains poorly understood. We hypothesized that WNT-5A/5B might impact on alveolar epithelial repair. **Methods:** Lungs were harvested for precision-cut lung slices (PCLS) or the generation of lung organoids. PCLS were treated with recombinant WNT-5A or WNT-5B (500 ng/mL) or vehicle control. Lung organoids recapitulate various features of the lung providing an in vitro model system for studying regenerative mechanisms of adult lung epithelium. Lung organoids were established by co-culturing epithelial cells (EpCAM⁺/CD45⁻/CD31⁻) with CCL206 fibroblasts in Matrigel. **Results:** The gene expression levels of the non-canonical ligands WNT-5A and WNT-5B were increased in whole lung tissue from aged WT mice and their expression correlated with the senescence marker p16. In PCLS derived from young WT mice, treatment with WNT-5A had no effect on gene expression of the type I and type II epithelial cell markers Aqp5 and Sftpc; interestingly, WNT-5B treatment significantly decreased gene expression of Aqp5 (mean difference = 36.35% ± 10.93%, compared to vehicle control, p < 0.05,) and Sftpc (mean difference = 46.25% ± 5.76%, compared to vehicle control, p < 0.01). In addition, WNT-5B significantly decreased expression of the canonical WNT target gene, Axin2 (mean difference = 83.13% ± 9.65%, compared to vehicle control, p < 0.05). The number of organoids visible 7 days after culture was significantly decreased by WNT-5A and WNT-5B (p < 0.05). WNT-5A significantly decreased the number of airway type organoids (p < 0.01), whereas WNT-5B selectively repressed alveolar type organoid formation (p < 0.05). Immunofluorescence studies confirmed that numbers of acetylated- α tubulin⁺ organoids were significantly decreased by both WNT-5A and WNT-5B, however, numbers of SPC⁺ organoids were significantly decreased by WNT-5B (p < 0.05). Neither WNT-5A nor WNT-5B stimulation affected the size of lung organoids measured on day -14. **Conclusions:** Non-canonical WNT signaling is correlated with ageing. The non-canonical WNT ligands WNT-5A and WNT-5B repress gene expression of alveolar epithelial cell markers in lung slices, and functionally inhibit lung organoid formation. We speculate that such a mechanism may contribute to defective alveolar repair in ageing and COPD.

This abstract is funded by: CSC

Am J Respir Crit Care Med 2018;197:A7624

Internet address: www.atsjournals.org

Online Abstracts Issue